



# Adoptive Mothers' and Fathers' Psychological Distress: Parenting Teens Adopted from Birth

Christina M. Sellers<sup>1</sup>, LCSW; Addie Wyman Battalen<sup>1</sup>, LICSW; Lisa Fiorenzo<sup>2</sup>; Ruth G. McRoy<sup>1</sup>, PhD; Harold D. Grotevant<sup>2</sup>, PhD

<sup>1</sup>Boston College School of Social Work, <sup>2</sup>University of Massachusetts Amherst



## Abstract

This study tests pathways to adoptive parents' psychological distress over time, and then examines gender differences in psychological distress. Participants included 190 adoptive mothers and 190 adoptive fathers from the longitudinal Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project, a study of U.S. domestic infant adoptions. The majority of adoptive parents reported low psychological distress. Some struggled throughout their adopted youth’s childhood and adolescence. This study utilizes data allowing an examination of parenting during middle childhood and adolescence. For adoptive mothers and fathers, outside stressors significantly predicted psychological distress. For adoptive fathers, perceived parent-child incompatibility was also predictive.

## Introduction

- Though the vast majority of adoptive parents are satisfied with their decision to adopt, research indicates that stress levels can be higher in adoptive parents, compared with nonadoptive parents, and this stress can lead to increased psychological distress among parents.
- Previous research on parental psychological distress has emphasized adverse child outcomes such as problematic child behavior, the parent-child relationship, and child functioning across socio-demographic groups and within many contexts.
- Research has primarily focused on nonadoptive families.
- The limited research examining psychological distress among adoptive families has largely focused on child outcomes and the role adoptive mothers play in child outcomes, failing to focus on parent outcomes or the role of adoptive fathers.
- The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the direct and indirect effects that adopted child behavior, negative spousal relationship, parent-child incompatibility, and outside stressors have on psychological distress among adoptive parents 10 to 20 years post-placement using two waves of data from the longitudinal Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project study.

## Methodology

### Sample:

- Participants included 190 adoptive mothers (W1, Mage = 39.1) and 190 adoptive fathers (W1, Mage = 40.7) from the longitudinal Minnesota /Texas Adoption Research Project, a study of U.S. domestic infant adoptions. The majority of adoptive parents identified as White, middle to upper-middle class, and reported low psychological distress.

### Procedures & Measures:

- Participants were recruited from 35 private adoption agencies from 23 different states across the United States and followed for 4 waves of data collection. W1 and W2 are used in this study.
- Adoptive parents’ psychological distress* was assessed using the Global Severity Index of the Brief Symptom Inventory measured at W2; *Parental relationship characteristics* were measured using the Relationship with Spouse subscale the Parenting Stress Index at W1; *Perceived parent-child incompatibility* was assessed by combining four Child Domain subscales of the PSI at both W1 and W2; *Adopted youths’ externalizing behavior* was measured using the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory at W1 and the Child Behavior Checklist at W2; *Outside Stressors* was measured through a modified total Family Inventory of Life Events and Changes at W2.

## Results

- Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) procedures were used in LISREL 8.80 to run structural equation models.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation for Observed Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. W1 Incomp.	--	0.455***	0.56***	0.267**	0.46***	0.017	-0.003	0.131
2. W2 Incomp.	0.484***	--	0.303***	0.705***	0.285**	0.197*	0.277**	0.232**
3. W1 Ext.	0.626***	0.377***	--	0.337***	0.221**	0.067	-0.041	0.025
4. W2 Ext.	0.336***	0.626***	0.426***	--	0.168	0.314***	0.284**	0.225**
5. W1 Neg. Sp. Rel..	0.301***	0.183*	0.139	0.167*	--	0.095	0.137	0.335***
6. W2 Neg. Sp. Rel.	0.060	0.046	0.001	0.096	0.017	--	0.372***	0.133
7. W2 Out. Str.	0.193*	0.245**	0.189*	0.339***	0.044	0.268**	--	0.34***
8. W2 Psych. Distr.	0.148	0.158	0.032	0.248**	0.142	0.161*	0.39***	--
M <sub>adoptive mothers</sub>	62.50	67.73	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.505
SD <sub>adoptive mothers</sub>	12.95	17.49	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.235
M <sub>adoptive fathers</sub>	64.41	69.78	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.543
SD <sub>adoptive fathers</sub>	12.83	18.20	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.308

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Notes: Psychological distress was square-root transformed; Externalizing behavior and negative spousal relationship were z-scored; Correlations for adoptive mothers ( $N=190$ ) are below the main diagonal; those for adoptive fathers ( $N=190$ ) are above the main diagonal.

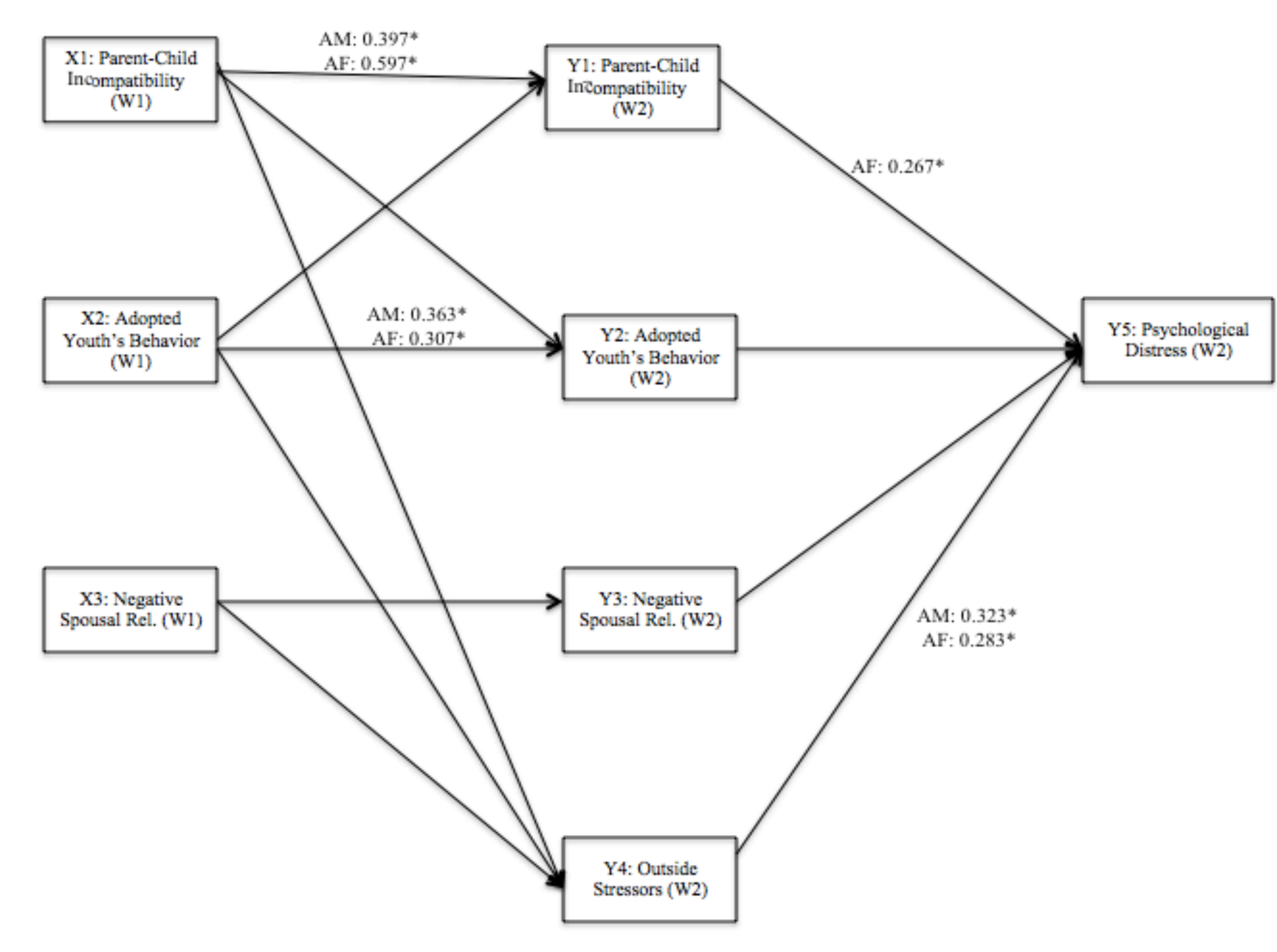


Figure 1. Mothers’ and Fathers’ model for the relationship between parent-child incompatibility, negative spousal relationship, adopted youths’ externalizing behavior, and outside stressors with psychological distress among adoptive mothers and fathers.

Note: Standardized coefficients are displayed for significant paths

## Results Continued

- The majority of adoptive mothers and fathers reported doing well in regards to psychological distress. Of the 380 adoptive mothers and fathers 12% ( $n=23$ ) of adoptive mothers and 27% ( $n=51$ ) of adoptive fathers were above the clinical cut off for psychological distress and 5% ( $n=10$ ) of adoptive mothers and 25% ( $n=45$ ) of adoptive fathers met diagnostic criteria.
- For adoptive mothers, the global fit statistics indicate a well-fitting model (RMSEA = 0.033; 90% CI for RMSEA = [0.00, 0.099]), which suggests that the adoptive mother data fit the specified model. Parental Psychological Distress is significantly predicted by Outside Stressors ( $\beta_{54} = 0.08$ ,  $t = 3.86$ ) only.
- For adoptive fathers, the global fit statistics indicate an adequate fitting model (RMSEA = 0.081; 90% CI for RMSEA = [0.024, 0.14]). Parental Psychological Distress is significantly predicted by Parent-Child Incompatibility ( $\beta_{51} = 0.004$ ,  $t = 2.68$ ) and Outside Stressors ( $\beta_{54} = 0.09$ ,  $t = 3.34$ ).

### Illustrative Quotes:

#### Fathers

- Parent-Child Incompatibility: “One reason we went through the adoption agency we did, they really match a lot of backgrounds you know, the height, the weight, the color of the eyes, the hair and everything else. And with that I think what would have been difficult is if Belinda, my wife and I are both around 5’ 5”, and if Belinda at this age was 6’. That I think is where a lot of the social problems come... no different I think than if we had gone over to Africa and adopted an African child. It’s immediately known that that’s not your child. I mean it’s just an automatic.”
- “I’m more traditional, she’s more avant garde, I guess. She’s, I think right now very idealistic or naive, and I try to be or think I am very practical”.

- Outside Stressors: “Two years ago, my mom had a major heart attack, and that put us through some strain”

#### Mothers

- Outside Stressors: “Her [participant’s mother] passing away was really, very hard for all of us.”
- “Our family split up and we have lower economic resources... less resources..”

## Discussion and Implications for Practitioners

- These findings highlight the importance of assessing issues that are beyond the direct family interaction and include outside stressors (consistent with the ecological theoretical model) when assessing for psychological distress among adoptive families.
- Findings from our study extend the research in this area by focusing in on psychological distress among adoptive families over time, and more specifically comparing results of adoptive mothers and fathers.
- Our findings suggest that therapeutic support for adoptive families should continue to be offered months and years post-adoption.
- When working with adoptive parents with psychological distress, it is important for clinicians to inquire about incompatibility between adoptive parents and their adopted adolescent and outside stressors related to the family as these constructs can affect psychological distress.